

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

Interview with **SUSAN MEEHAN**

Susan Meehan met Marion Barry when they served on the Pilot District Project, a pre-Home Rule program to improve police-community relations. She supported him in all his election campaigns and in 1978 was his coordinator for Ward Two. In 1979, she had a contract to assist in developing the DC government mechanism for responding to citizen complaints. Later she worked in the Office of Constituent Services as Ward 2 representative, before becoming the Patient's Advocate in the Department of Human Service for clients in Drug and Alcohol Abuse Treatment.

October 6, 2015

BETTY KING: Today is the 6th of October. My name is Betty King, and I'm talking to Susan Meehan.

Susan, tell me where you lived before you came to Washington, and what you were doing?

SUSAN MEEHAN: I grew up in Long Island and a bit in Mexico City, as well. I went away to college at Wellesley, worked at Harvard for a year before I went to graduate school at Boston University, and helped get a man elected as governor of Massachusetts, worked as his special assistant, took the management intern tests for working in the State Department, and came to Washington.

BETTY KING: And what year did you come to Washington?

SUSAN MEEHAN: I got here on July 7th, 1964, which was the same day I met my husband.

BETTY KING: Really? Where did you meet him?

SUSAN MEEHAN: We were both in the same training program.

BETTY KING: At the State Department?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes, and he was sitting next to me. I had not met him before. And he was talking and talking and talking. He had a lot to say and much of it was very good. But the class instructor came up to me and tapped me on the shoulder, and said, "I'm putting you in charge of keeping that man from talking too much." Well, I haven't completed my assignment yet because that man became my husband.

BETTY KING: And 50-odd years later he's still talking too much?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes. Yes. That's why we were at the lawyer's where we were working on wills and stuff like that.

BETTY KING: When did you meet Marion Barry?

SUSAN MEEHAN: I met him after we were both elected to the Pilot District Project which was set up after the riots in Washington, D.C., by the President, who did not want to have to deal with the civil distress in the city.

BETTY KING: And what year was that?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Let's see. 1968 was the year that Martin Luther King was killed. We bought our home a week before the riots. We could have bought it much more cheaply 2 days later but we didn't know that. So, it must have been '68 or '69, because it took a while to set up the program.

BETTY KING: Tell about the program, and about your relationship with Marion in it.

SUSAN MEEHAN: My relationship with Marion began when I nominated him to be president of the board. I figured he would be anyway so I might as well get in there and make a point or two. I'd never met him, but I nominated him.

BETTY KING: Did you know about him in advance?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Oh, from reading in the newspapers, which was filled with stuff about dashikis and all kinds of things.

BETTY KING: And he was head of Pride, Inc. [a youth training and employment program], at that time?

SUSAN MEEHAN: He was, indeed.

BETTY KING: And was involved in the Free D.C. Movement as well, was he?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes. Yes, he was, and all of which continued during his early parts of working with the Pilot District Project, which turned out to be, I think, a very good experience. Number one, we all came from quite different backgrounds, because the elections were set up that way. They were coordinated by age, sex, whether you had schooling, all kinds of different things.

At any rate, despite all that, the people who were on the board turned out to enjoy each other, and because we liked each other, we all worked together to help Marion and Dave get elected.

BETTY KING: Dave?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Clark, who was also on the PDP board and who became chairman of the City Council.

BETTY KING: After he was Ward 1 councilmember.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes. That's correct.

BETTY KING: So what kind of things did the board do?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Well, I can give you a story—

BETTY KING: Please.

SUSAN MEEHAN: —which you might enjoy. The Panthers came into town, the Black Panthers [a revolutionary black nationalist and socialist organization⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾ active in the United States from 1966 until 1982], and they were unhappy folk. I can't remember what it was that really upset them but it must have been something significant, or they upset very easily, or some combination of the two, because they were holed up in a house on 17th Street, just three buildings south of U [Street], right near the police headquarters and near the Pilot District Project. So, the president's office didn't want to deal with them. No, no, no. People got elected; they're the ones who should deal with it. So, the board told Marion and me to go over there and negotiate with them.

Well, we decided to walk over, and we were a little nervous because we didn't know what was going to happen over there. We talked about history of black-white relations and I told him about the black Irish in Ireland, of who he had never heard. These are the descendants of the Moors, who worked with the Spaniards in trying to take down the British, but who, unfortunately, ran into a terrible hurricane and—

BETTY KING: This was the Armada that came against Elizabeth I?

SUSAN MEEHAN: The Armada, yes. And I am assuming the Moors who ended on the British coast probably were killed off, but the Irish took them all in because they were opposed to the British, and they stayed there as a fairly distinct group.

At any rate, I told him they were a tough group. As I finished the story we arrived at the building. The building had all its windows bricked up except for little slits, great for guns. Very scary looking. And it turned out it also had—well, you couldn't see it from the outside—an escape tunnel that had been dug in case they needed to get out of that building quickly, that debouched into an empty lot that nobody had ever paid any attention to.

Anyway, we got to the building and Marion knocked on the door. The door opened up about a foot. "Who's there?" "It's Marion Barry and I've got Mrs. Meehan with me and we're here to talk to you." "We know who you are, Marion Barry, but who is that *bad word, bad word, white lady, bad word, bad word,*" at which point Marion turned to me, gave me this huge wink and smile, and turned back and said, "Have you ever heard of the Black Irish?" "No." "Well, Mrs. Meehan is one of them and they're very mean, tough folks so you had better act right."

[Laughter.]

SUSAN MEEHAN: We went downstairs. They treated us very nicely. But the whole group of them paraded back and forth, right in front of me, and they were clearly trying to see if any of

my features could possibly have worked with the Black Irish. And given that I had red hair, freckles, and green eyes, I don't think so.

[Laughter.]

SUSAN MEEHAN: But we told them we would go back and take their problems to the appropriate parts of the government, and they let us out very nicely.

I have two P.S.'s on that one. Number one, I walked past the building a couple of weeks ago and the owners of the building are everything that Marion wasn't. I could not imagine any group less like either the Panthers or anything that Marion would have done. It's Jack and Jill, which is the black equivalent of the Junior League. And believe me, they did not want to hear one bit about this history.

BETTY KING: You volunteered it and they didn't—

SUSAN MEEHAN: I volunteered it and they were not up to it.

The other P.S. is that I have been the godmother for some 45 years to a black family that used to live on the block with us when we were the first white family integrating that part of the city. They played with my children. We recently had a reunion at our house and I was telling one of them about this story, and he said, "Oh, I was a Black Panther." He must have been one of the meeker Black Panthers, as if one can imagine that. But I do think that I'm probably, well, I don't think there are too many white godmothers of Black Panthers any place in this country.

BETTY KING: Probably not. So, this is 1968-69, maybe '70, and it went on for a couple of years, did it?

SUSAN MEEHAN: It did.

BETTY KING: By this time Marion is running for the school board. Is that correct?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Mm-hmm. We helped him run for the school board, for the City Council.

BETTY KING: The school board election was when?

SUSAN MEEHAN: I don't know. It might have been '69, and a year or two later the City Council.

BETTY KING: That would be '74.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Was it that much longer? Yeah. And then, of course, for the election itself, I ran Ward 2 for him.

BETTY KING: I remember. You worked on virtually all of his campaigns, from the beginning.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes, I did. I used the techniques and things I learned from Massachusetts politics, and they turned out to be quite helpful.

BETTY KING: What were they, specifically?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Well, how to approach people on the street and ask for help and money and time, and knowing what are the kinds of things that people are interested in, taking good notes, making sure that cards were filled out, that you had information that was current, up-to-date, and correct. I was helped by the fact that I ended up unexpectedly writing a book at that time. I realized, shortly after being on the PDP, that the police were being approached by the community all the time for help on stuff, and in the pre-home rule police department they knew nothing. They had no idea of where to get help. They didn't think of people here as constituents who needed to be helped.

So, I started taking notes to help the police and one day I realized, "Oh, my God, you're writing a book." So, that turned out to be useful because when Marion got elected he asked me to set up the program that would coordinate responding to citizen inquiries and problems.

BETTY KING: I still have a copy of your book, by the way. Blue cover?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Well, it's a museum piece at this point.

BETTY KING: I know. Those things do change, but I still have it.

Okay. So here we are, in 1977, '78, is the primary. When did you start organizing in Ward 2 for Marion, or did you just carry it on? Did you do Ward 2 for him in his previous races and just carried it on?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes. I had done that, so that was fairly simple to do.

BETTY KING: So you were the dawn of Ward 2. You knew where all the people were and how to turn them out, and so forth.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes, and how to staff the different precincts and how to be there and coordinate. I might add that the precinct at which I worked, I saw them loading a whole bunch of boxes onto the back of a big truck. It was ballots they were taking out.

BETTY KING: This was during Election Day?

SUSAN MEEHAN: During the Election Day, and on that very day they must have hit a pothole in the street because at least three boxes fell out onto the street and were scattered all over the place. Oh, my God.

BETTY KING: Oh, my lord. You retrieved them, obviously.

SUSAN MEEHAN: They retrieved them, yes, and I am pleased to say that in the Dupont Circle area, which was part of Ward 2, and still is, Marion got a higher percentage of votes there than I think in any other part of the city.

BETTY KING: Really? Congratulations.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes. I was thrilled by that.

BETTY KING: So Ward 2, in effect, which was part of Ivanhoe's [Donaldson, Barry's 1978 campaign manager] and Marion's strategy, was that they were going to win big in 1, 2, 3, and 6, at least in the western part of 6. Was there an active [presence of Barry' opponents in the 1978 election, incumbent Mayor] Walter Washington or [City Council Chairman] Sterling Tucker campaigns in Ward 2?

SUSAN MEEHAN: No. I don't think there was very much. I don't recall much of it, because they didn't know how to run elections. They hadn't had a history of elections. This city was the only place in the country to have the beginnings of political life during my time in the city.

BETTY KING: In fact, when you first came there was nothing.

SUSAN MEEHAN: There was no active politics at all because there was no way to handle it. The only thing that people had available to them were the community associations, well, civic associations. One was white and one was black. They're the only people who had any pull at all with the people who did run the city, who ran it at the behest of the Members of Congress, who were in charge. And they didn't have to respond to the community at all.

BETTY KING: Were you involved in the campaign for home rule?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes. I went and testified. I remember a really nasty Republican from Kansas say to me, "Well, you can just move out, you know." And I said, "Well, what about my children? They're native Washingtonians. Shouldn't they have some rights to be a citizen rather than a subject?" That was not well received.

[Laughter.]

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes, and we still have, on our wall at home, a marvelous poster put out by the Black Men's Development Center, celebrating the advent of home rule in the city. It was so hopeful and young and expected wonderful things to happen, it then said. But I look at it and think, we've got a long ways to go, still.

BETTY KING: Yeah, we do. It was a time of great hope. We really thought, in those early years, that we could make a huge difference. Another generation has to come behind us and make it happen.

SUSAN MEEHAN: I stayed in contact with Marion.

BETTY KING: So you continued in the general election, which was pretty much a walk in the park. You ran Ward 2. And then during the transition you were developing this scheme for the information on people who had problems?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes. Right. I ran Ward 2 from within the administration for a couple of years, but at that point I did not have any health insurance and was told that political appointees did not get health insurance.

BETTY KING: What?

SUSAN MEEHAN: And I asked to be sent to a regular civil service job, because I couldn't afford not to have any health insurance.

BETTY KING: I think somebody gave you bad information because I was a political appointee and I had health insurance.

SUSAN MEEHAN: That's so interesting.

BETTY KING: Anyway, so where did you go?

SUSAN MEEHAN: I became, first, the special assistant to the head of the alcohol and drug abuse treatment programs, and then I became the city's patient advocate for everyone in drug or alcohol treatment in the city. Essentially, I could do anything I wanted to do with that job.

BETTY KING: I bet you took advantage of it too.

SUSAN MEEHAN: For the benefit of the people who really need it, yes.

BETTY KING: That's what I mean. Of course.

SUSAN MEEHAN: It was not a nine-to-five job at all.

BETTY KING: You would have been a perfect person to do that, because you would be a Rottweiler about getting them their rights, I'm sure.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Despite the fact I'd never taken a drug in my life, and I'd had more to drink only once in my life, and I did not like the feeling of it so never did that again, but it really was an honor to be able to help, both at the level of making decisions about what we did and working to support that, and also trying to help individual patients who had problems and take them through the system. You know, if you save one person's life it's really—

BETTY KING: Of course.

SUSAN MEEHAN: It was as worthwhile as it possibly could be. And, of course, it just hurt my heart to keep on hearing these rumors about what Marion was supposed to be up to. And it was at that time, right after Christmas—

BETTY KING: You're talking about the third administration now?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes.

BETTY KING: So this would be in '86 and beyond.

SUSAN MEEHAN: I should just insert in there that Marion asked me to read a poem—I am a poet—at his second inaugural, and I think I read it to more people than I have ever read any poem to before or since. There were thousands of people at that inaugural.

BETTY KING: There were indeed, overflowing.

SUSAN MEEHAN: It was a good poem.

BETTY KING: I'm sure it was. So, your heart is hurting because of the rumors.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes, and I didn't know what to make of them. But my husband and I were having a Twelfth Night party and the city wanted Marion to be at that party, and I was saying, "Let him get his act cleared up first." But they pushed me and pushed me and pushed me, and so I said, "Yes, of course, I'll let him come. I love him. I just don't want him to be in trouble."

Anyway, he came, and he spoke brilliantly. One of the doctors who was at the party came over and said, "You know, I've heard a lot of rumors about him using stuff, but he couldn't possibly be. He was so on top of all those numbers, and that was such a good speech." Twelve days later he was arrested, of course. I feel he was set up—I strongly feel that.

Anyway, I went to his home where there was a going-away party—I was there—and I was there when he had a coming-back-home party.

BETTY KING: When he came home [from jail].

SUSAN MEEHAN: Darn right.

BETTY KING: So your support and love for him has been unwavering over the years.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Definitely. You know, I went to his funeral, and the thing that struck me the most about his funeral, other than the fact that there weren't very many white faces there, was that I kept on hearing, all over this enormous room, people would turn to another person with a sense of real devastation, and I heard them saying, over and over, "He gave me the first job I ever had." Well, there were thousands of people in that room. He had helped all those thousands of people, and however many more there were.

BETTY KING: Well, of course, when he instituted the Summer Youth Employment Program and the Mayor's Youth Leadership Institute, that became the platform for all of this help for young people, and trying to keep them on the straight and narrow, with productive work and opportunities.

SUSAN MEEHAN: That's right, and that made such a difference in people's lives. That Youth Leadership program was wonderful. I know because my son went through it and he came pretty close to being elected [youth] mayor of the city, which I'm glad he didn't, but be that as it

may, the training was excellent in that program, and kids who hadn't had anything done for them learned a great deal and were appreciative. The young people in this city, I think, understood that when Marion was being raked over the coals, a lot of that stuff that didn't really occur in the same way that it was referred to. And I think that made a great deal of difference.

And if he helped the youth of this city, which he certainly did, there were all kinds of groups who were helped in the city. I think the seniors were given respect for the first time, and a love developed between them and Marion that continued throughout his life, over the years, and who wanted to contribute to this city. People who wanted to do something. He always found a place for them to do something.

BETTY KING: Many of them were on the boards and commissions that were administered through my office.

SUSAN MEEHAN: That's right.

BETTY KING: You know, the Latino Commission and the Asian Pacific Commission. I mean, you know, plus all the professional and advisory boards. But there were thousands of people that he appointed every year to boards and commissions.

SUSAN MEEHAN: And he paid more attention to it than anybody did.

BETTY KING: Ever before or since.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes, and the city was the better for it. My husband served for years on the fire department board and learned so much from that. It was wonderful. And I served on a board that dealt with persons who had disabilities of one sort or another, and you did a terrific job at a time when the whole idea of doing it through computers was in its early stages. Luckily, you were very good with details and overarching efforts.

BETTY KING: Well, Marion understood the value of involving as many people as possible.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes, he did.

BETTY KING: I mean, and he did it every transition. The transition to the fourth administration was fantastic. We had 2,000 people who gave up their time between Thanksgiving and Christmas to write proposals to him as to what he should do in the government. Of course, he couldn't do a lot of it because of the control board [established by Congress to supervise the DC government in 1995], but, I mean, he wanted more people. He wanted more people to be part of telling him what they want and so forth.

SUSAN MEEHAN: I've got another Marion Barry story.

BETTY KING: Tell.

SUSAN MEEHAN: There was a seminar on black policing held in New York City, and part of it involved a big party at Gracie Mansion. I'm a native New Yorker. I had never been inside Gracie Mansion, and I thought this is an opportunity I was just not going to let slip by. My husband could not go with me to New York but I went with Marion Barry—

BETTY KING: When you were both on the PDP board. Was that the context?

SUSAN MEEHAN: —and Chief [Maurice] Turner. Yes.

BETTY KING: Was Marion mayor at this time or was this when you were on the board?

SUSAN MEEHAN: I'm trying to remember.

BETTY KING: Well, anyways, you went.

SUSAN MEEHAN: We all went, and they held it at a very nice hotel way downtown, near the tip. And I needed to get ready to go to this party at Gracie Mansion, and I all of a sudden realized that the dress I was wearing was one that had three buttons or so on it, and I did not have my husband there to button me up, and I needed help. I called down to the concierge and asked to have somebody sent up to the room so that I could finish getting dressed, and they said, "Oh, no. We can't do that at all for fear of charges of sexual something or other." Well, I had no transgressions in mind whatsoever.

But that gave me the choice of either asking Marion Barry or the chief of police to button me up, and I knew that the *Washington Post* had a reporter standing around, and I thought, I don't think I want to have a picture showing too much flesh with either one of those guys. Well, I gave it to Maurice and that was fine. The *Washington Post* photographer managed not to take a picture.

BETTY KING: Of you being buttoned up by the chief of police.

SUSAN MEEHAN: That's right. It would have been great fun, and even more fun if Marion had done it. Too bad.

The day the airplane went down, and there was, at the same time, a Metro [subway] crash.

BETTY KING: Right. There was a Metro crash and a plane crashed in the Potomac. And it was snowing.

SUSAN MEEHAN: It certainly was. It was a trifecta of awfulness. And it was very interesting to see how in control Marion was, and how he could switch quickly from one to another topic, handling them without getting upset. And the fire chief was having a nervous breakdown over all this, and he was calling Marion every 5 minutes, saying he couldn't do this, couldn't do that, and Marion would say, "Get it done." I don't think the chief lasted much longer after that. But it was interesting to see him in control.

I also went and visited him right after he had been shot. In fact, I brought him a casserole.

BETTY KING: A what?

SUSAN MEEHAN: I brought him a casserole. I didn't think he was up to cooking too much.

BETTY KING: This was after the Hanafi terrorists invaded the District Building [in January 1977].

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes, it was. And one final story involves the Pitts Motor Hotel. A year after the Pilot District Project got started, we decided to have a party to celebrate the fact that it was working better than anybody had expected. But we wanted to hold it in the third police district and the only place we could find to hold it in was the Pitts Motor Hotel. The Pitts isn't there any longer.

BETTY KING: Where was it located?

SUSAN MEEHAN: Up in Columbia Heights. Its only virtue was that it was big. And we were told that we could have the basement room but we would have to share it with another group who was having a function that night. It was in February. We sent out invitations to the chief of police, all the top police brass, lots of people, and they all came. And we had not been paying too much attention to the other group, except they were quite well-dressed and rather formally dressed. But they started lip-syncing songs, and all of a sudden we realized we were sharing the same room, the police were, with a drag queen group electing their Valentine's Day Queen of the Year.

BETTY KING: I love it. I love it.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Now this was 6 months, I think, before Stonewall in New York*, and I could see the police were sort of involuntary grasping where their truncheons would have been had they not had on their dress uniforms, so they didn't have any truncheons. Marion and I laughed over that for years afterwards. It was absolutely wonderful. He'd known, I think, all along, who it was going to be. He did not stand in the way at all. *[The Stonewall riots were a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the gay community against a police raid that took place in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn, located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, New York City].

BETTY KING: Okay. You have another story.

SUSAN MEEHAN: Yes. We went to the National Democratic Convention.

BETTY KING: What year was this?

SUSAN MEEHAN: It must have been—

BETTY KING: '72 or '76?

SUSAN MEEHAN: —'72, in Miami.

BETTY KING: That's right.

SUSAN MEEHAN: And I remember having a discussion with Marion about a bill that was being proposed to support gay rights, and it was the first time a gay rights plank had ever been introduced [for the Democratic Party platform]. And I remember sitting down next to him. We were sitting on a hill overlooking Miami, and he was saying to me, "You know, if one person isn't free then none of us are free." And that made so much sense to me. I took that position ever since and I'm grateful to him for having thought of that and said it to me.

That's about all.

BETTY KING: Well, thank you very much, Susan. I appreciate your testimony.